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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - September 23,
2005

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled
by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

Civil Society

¶2. GOB Customs Service "Stays Outside Politics"

On September 16, the State Customs Committee announced
that the GOB has not ordered the Belarusian customs
service to seize propaganda materials in the run up to
the presidential elections. Customs, however, can seize
any item that falls on the list of printed materials
that cannot be brought into Belarus, which include
printed publications that can harm the country.

¶3. Migration Trends

On September 16, Interior Ministry deputy Sergei Matus
announced statistics on migration trends. Whereas the
GOB granted permanent resident status to 7,000 people
thus far in 2005, 6,500 Belarusian citizens have
emigrated permanently to destinations such as the U.S.,
Germany and Israel. Slightly more than 5,000 Belarusian
citizens leave the country annually to work abroad in
countries like Russia, the U.S., Britain, Belgium and the
Czech Republic.

¶4. Foreign Spies Active In Belarus

On September 19, the Belarusian KGB accused foreign
intelligence services of undertaking "extremely
aggressive and hysterical work" against Belarus in the
lead up to the 2006 presidential election. The KGB
threatens to expose the work of the spies in order to
prevent Belarusian citizens from being recruited.

¶5. GOB Does Not Re-register 100 Tourist Companies

On September 21, the Ministry of Sport and Tourism has
cancelled the licenses of over 100 tourist companies in
Belarus. Most of them had not applied for license renewals,
presumably because they did not want to participate in the
government-mandated import of tourists.

Human Rights

¶6. GOB Rejects UN Human Rights Initiatives

On September 19, GOB authorities announced that they
would not cooperate with UN Commission on Human Rights
Special Rapporteur Adrian Severin since they deemed his
appointment to be "unjustified" and his report

"unbalanced and biased." The GOB also opposed the U.S. proposal to remove countries that do not meet certain human rights standards from the UN Human Rights Council. Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Gaisenok stated that it gives "countries using the human rights theme to achieve their own political goals enormous opportunities for manipulation."

¶17. Number of Independent Newspapers Decreased

At the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) tenth anniversary conference on September 16, BAJ lawyer Mikhail Pastukhov announced the number of independent newspapers has decreased threefold in the last five years. He also pointed out that no new periodicals have appeared during that time and the total number of periodicals has decreased by 243 in the last two years.

¶18. Belarus Will Not Prohibit Foreign Broadcasts into Belarus

On September 21, the Ministry of Communication announced it does not plan to hinder foreign television and radio broadcasts into Belarus. However, the GOB plans to continue its long-term strategy to bring "true and unbiased information about Belarus" to bordering regions in EU member countries.

¶19. No State-Sponsored Anti-Semitism Here

On September 15, Israeli Ambassador to Belarus Zeev Ben Arie stated he does "not consider anti-Semitism a state phenomena in Belarus." The Ambassador did acknowledge that isolated manifestations of anti-Semitism do occur and urged authorities to respond quickly and accurately

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to these incidents.

¶10. Laid Off Employees Fight Back

On September 15, activists announced plans to form an association for those who have lost their job as a result of the GOB's new employment contract system. The new system makes it easier to dismiss employees from their jobs. Authorities, however, often misuse the system as a means to crack down on opposition and independent trade union activists. The association plans to hold awareness campaigns, solicit support from international organizations and create a database of affected workers.

¶11. Ethnicity Identification Required for University

Belarusian State University must present lists of student who identify themselves as Poles or Lithuanians to the local deans' offices. Although the university authorities claim this measure satisfies their need for information on international students at the university, it is coincidental that they want information on students from countries with which the GOB has recently had problems.

Economics

¶12. Raiffeisen to Provide Lukoil-Belarus with USD 20 Million

On September 20, Raiffeisen Zentralbank Oesterrich AG (Austria) loaned Lukoil-Belarus USD 20 million to finance supplies of Lukoil crude oil to Belarus refineries. The agreement was signed at Priorbank OJSC, which is a member of RZB Group and a subsidiary of Raiffeisen International Bank Holding.

¶13. GOB Takes 95% Share in Minsk Porcelain Plant

On September 22, the GOB announced plans to increase its shareholding in the Minsk Porcelain Plant from 9% to 95%. Lukashenko recently signed a decree creating an additional 2.6 million shares for government purchase at BYR 500 [USD 0.23] each. In previous cases the GOB would first take over ownership of a company through the Golden Share before having the company grant a majority stake to the GOB. This is the first case where the GOB dispensed with the intermediate pretense of using the Golden Share.

¶14. Belarus' Breweries Fear Premium Barley Shortage

The quality of this year's barley crop is lower than last year, therefore making it difficult to meet the quality beer production expectations. Homegrown barley cannot supplement the crop, which means that Belarus will have to import additional barley to make beer. However, in early September Lukashenko ordered brewers to only use domestic barley, claiming there was sufficient quality and quantity.

Bilateral Relations

¶15. Belarus and Iraq to Restore Trade Relations

On September 15 at the UNGA, Lukashenko and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani agreed to restore bilateral trade and economic relations. Before Belarus and Iraq suspended trade relations in 2002, bilateral trade turnover reached USD 30 million. Political scientist Vladimir Ulakovich labeled the recent negotiations as an "act of courtesy" since he sees little chance of restored relations, claiming that even Russia has been ousted from the Iraqi market.

International Relations

¶16. Lukashenko Allows IAEA Inspections

On September 19, Lukashenko issued an edict to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to access Belarus' nuclear facilities under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The IAEA will be able to conduct inspections to verify the GOB's nuclear material and use reports.

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Quote of the Week

¶17. At the UNGA on September 15, Lukashenko reminisced about the glory days of the former USSR:

"Fifteen years have passed since the break up of my country, the USSR. The Soviet Union, despite all the mistakes and blunders of its leaders, was the source of hope and support for many states and peoples."

¶18. On September 20, Lukashenko declared that the Belarusian opposition would soon find its funding channels plugged up completely:

"After the [2006] presidential election, there will be not many grants either for political opposition or so-called free trade unions. There will no longer be sponsors around to carry them on their backs."

¶19. He also warned a pro-government trade union federation to focus on representing the interest of workers and not protecting the rights of people:

"If you rush to protect human rights, you will wind up doing the same [thing] that the political opposition does."

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